

A FAILED SHOWCASE OF EMPIRE?: THE GOLD COAST POLICE BAND, COLONIAL RECORD KEEPING, AND A 1947 TOUR OF GREAT BRITAIN

by

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Abstract. In 1947, the Gold Coast Police Band embarked on a four-month long tour of Great Britain. The event, which was organized by the Accra government and Colonial Office in London, was designed to be a carefully-scripted showcase of the Empire's merits and future prospects. As a result, the bulk of the written records that colonial officials compiled about it focused not on its actual progression or outcomes, but on their own preparations and confidence about its "inevitable" success. This article examines this pattern of colonial record keeping and looks beyond its overt declarations to analyze a series of incomplete exchanges, isolated letters, and brief references that tell a much more complicated story. Insisting that these archival fragments reveal that the tour did not go as planned, it also proposes that we can use them to engage two topics important to studies of African music during the colonial period: the state's strategic use of music and the colonial archive's utility as a source of information about past musical events.

In early May 1947, thirty-five members of the Gold Coast Police Band gathered at Accra's airfield and boarded a plane bound for London.¹ Over the next four months, the Band traveled throughout Great Britain, where it appeared in public ceremonies, visited the studios of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and His Master's Voice (HMV), and performed in front of hundreds of thousands of people. Unsurprisingly, the tour was a carefully orchestrated affair. Over the course of the ten months that comprised its preparation and execution, officials in two complimentary centers of imperial power—the Gold Coast government in Accra and the Colonial Office in London—choreographed what they expected to be a potent display of the Band's organization, acquired repertoire of British songs, and status as a cohort of African policemen who had been taught to do an "unusually good job of straight music making". For those administrators of Empire, the Band's British venture was not simply a means of exposing metropolitan audiences to one of the Gold Coast's most "remarkable achievements": it was a much-needed chance to demonstrate colonialism's ability to transform "backwards peoples" into civilized subjects and revive public enthusiasm for

¹ I would like to thank the Wake Forest University Archie Fund for the Arts and Humanities for funding the research for this article. Further thanks go to Lisa Blee, Ben Coates, and two anonymous readers for their feedback and advice.

its continued prospects in the aftermath of the Second World War (Pearce 1982, Low 1988, Cooper 1996).²

Because the 1947 tour was a deliberate attempt to exhibit the efficacy of Empire, it was the subject of hundreds of administrative reports, government circulars, and internal letters, the remnants of which are now contained in archival files held in The National Archives (TNA) in Kew, England and the main repository of Ghana's Public Records and Archives Administration Department (PRAAD) in Accra. Such files are important for several reasons. First, they provide considerable detail about the Band and the tour, subjects which have received remarkably limited treatment in wider considerations of mid-twentieth century African popular music (Gillespie 1955, Stapleton 1990: 93–94, Pokoo-Aikins 2009: 73, Coester 2014: 47–48, Hukporti 2014). In addition to resurrecting what was likely the longest visit of a colonial band to the metropole³ and containing much-needed information on what is now one of Ghana's oldest continually-operating musical ensembles, the files provide important insights into a well-trodden topic: the nexus of musical performance and state power during Africa's colonial period (Ranger 1975, Martin 1991, Herbert and Sarkissian 1997, Reily and Brucher 2013). They also comprise the most extensive written documentation of a singular musical event during the Gold Coast's period of British rule, making them a valuable source base through which to assess how colonial officials wrote about the staged musical performances they used to fulfill wider political objectives.⁴

For all of their promise, however, the written documents which chronicle the Police Band's 1947 tour have noticeable limitations. Like other components of the colonial record, they are marred by their unevenness, obvious omissions, and disconcerting silences (Cohen 1994, Trouillot 1995). Nearly two-thirds of them concern the tour's genesis, planning, and organization, meaning that they privilege the tour that British officials prepared much more than that which actually took place. Concurrently, and rather frustratingly, those that do address the tour's progression offer very little information about the Band's musical activities, the aural or visual aspects of individual concerts, or the wider contexts in which the group performed. If British bureaucrats effectively ignored the tour's sonic and aesthetic components, they also accorded limited attention to the Gold Coast musicians. Compiled documents contain strikingly

² "The Gold Coast Police Band, 1946–7," TNA, CO 96/807/1/30.

³ To date, I've found only two other instances in which state-sponsored bands from the Empire performed in Great Britain. The West Indian Regiment Band played for 6 weeks at the 1926 British Empire Exhibition in London—Marc Matera, *Black London* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015): 157—and an "East African Band", likely that of the King's African Rifles, came to England to participate in the 1946 London Victory Celebrations—"The Gold Coast Police Band, 1946–7," TNA, CO 96/807/1.

⁴ While the principal archival holdings for the Gold Coast—the TNA, and the Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast, and Sekondi repositories of PRAAD—contain hundreds of thousands of files, they have a fairly small collection dedicated entirely to music or musical performance. Archival attention to musical events increases considerably following Ghana's 1957 independence, particularly in regards to the activities of the Arts Council, and many scholars have made good use of this: Plageman 2013, Schauert 2015, Shipley 2015.

little information about the bandsmen, omitting basic material such as their full names, hometowns, and day-to-day experiences on British soil.⁵ They also provide limited coverage about the tour's audiences, frequently addressing them only through numeric estimates about their gathered size or general comments about their enthusiastic response to the group's musical displays.

If colonial record keeping fails to discuss the human, sonic, and creative elements that give musical events their meaning, it does not shy away from offering up conclusions about the 1947 tour's impacts and outcomes. Rather, the bulk of its contents consistently proclaim that the event went as planned; that it successfully increased British audiences' appreciation for colonialism's operation and future prospects. What scholars should make of these idealistic assertions is an altogether different matter. Over the last several years, studies of the colonial archive have interrogated its contents not as pieces of information, but as claims to state power and status (Mbembe 2002, Stoler 2002). Others have revealed that its contents served not to expand readers' knowledge or understanding, but to perpetuate ignorance, validate preconceived notions, or sanction acts of forgetting (Stoler 2009). I want to suggest that the colonial documents chronicling the tour operated in a similar fashion. More specifically, I posit that their repeated declarations of the tour's success served to silence a less immediately visible, but perhaps more important, set of archival fragments (Allman 2013). These fragments—which include isolated letters, incomplete exchanges, and brief references—suggest that the tour did not go according to plan and that it caused considerable anxiety, not celebration, in the halls of Whitehall. If we focus on these scattered pieces, we get a more complex understanding of the tour, but we also get an opportunity to reflect upon two wider topics important to any scholar working on African music during the colonial period: the state's strategic use of music and the colonial archive's utility as a source of information about past musical events.

This article opens with a brief overview of the Band's history and colonial officials' efforts to plan and organize its four-month long British visit. After outlining the tour that they prepared as well as the remarkable sense of confidence they held in its inevitable successes, it turns its attention to two sets of archival fragments that unveil a far less rosy account of its outcomes and impacts. The first concerns an incomplete exchange that the Colonial Office had with the British Musicians' Union about the bandsmen's status; the second is a smattering of letters and circulars that it received (not compiled) about the Band's public reception. Each, I argue, reveals officials' growing conviction that the tour had been hijacked by unexpected "misinterpretations". After chronicling how Whitehall scrambled to respond to such developments, it ends with a brief discussion about what scholars interested in African music might take away from the tour and the record keeping practices colonial officials used to document it.

⁵ The sole document which references the bandsmen by name lists only their surnames and first-name initials: "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/164.

The origins and organization of the Police Band's 1947 tour

Like its many counterparts throughout the British Empire, the Gold Coast Police Band emerged as a tactical instrument for instilling and preserving colonial conceptualizations of order and “civilization”. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the British government used its first sponsored ensemble, the Gold Coast Regimental Band, to enhance its displays of military force, martial organization, and expanding political power. When Governor Frederick Gordon Guggisberg endorsed the Police Band's creation in 1919, he explained that it would provide the government with another “sound symbol” of its authority and means of engineering much-needed sociopolitical change (Collins 1994: 233). In 1920, a British officer from the Gold Coast Regiment became the Police Band's first bandmaster, enabling its twenty-five members to participate in regular rehearsals, acquire formal musical training, and increase their familiarity with European musical forms. When the band gave its first public performance a few years later, the Accra government expressed its assurance that it would be a great attraction and triumph.⁶

Over the next several decades, the Gold Coast administration put the Band to considerable use. It directed the ensemble to give regular free public concerts, broadcast live performances via the radio, and perform at state events. It also initiated the construction of public bandstands so that audiences in Accra, Sekondi, and other cities would be able to patronize the group's concerts in a “proper” seated fashion. Throughout the financially-fraught decade of the 1930s, the government committed roughly £2800 per year to support the Band's carefully-choreographed performances of military music, British standards, and patriotic tunes.⁷ Many officials, including Governor Arnold Hodson (1934–41), praised the ensemble as “very excellent from the propaganda point of view” and a relatively inexpensive, but effective, means of imparting sophisticated sensibilities onto Gold Coast peoples. “Music,” he unabashedly proclaimed, “hath power to soothe the savage!”⁸

Hodson's confidence in the Band's performances stemmed from a variety of factors. The first was the widespread set of assumptions that many British people—in and outside of the halls of governance—held about African peoples as well as the sway that European musical styles might have over them. Most firmly believed that Gold Coasters (and West Africans more widely) had an insatiable appetite for music, an innate instinct for rhythm, and an irrepressible fervor for dancing (Agawu 2003: 55–58, Flemming and Falola 2013: 1–7). This stereotype about African peoples' inherent musicality was paradoxically paired with the accusation that African musical styles were little more than obnoxious “noise” and were harmoniously and melodically “inferior” to their

⁶ “Gold Coast Police Band,” TNA, CO 96/807/1; “Engagement of the Gold Coast Regimental Band,” PRAAD-Sekondi, WRG 15/1/399/71; “Police Band Concerts in Accra,” PRAAD-Accra, CSO 15/1/299.

⁷ “Police Band, 1931–36,” PRAAD-Accra, CSO 25/1/49. “Police Band Concerts in Accra,” PRAAD-Accra, CSO 15/1/299.

⁸ “Police Band, 1931–36,” PRAAD-Accra, CSO 25/1/49.

European counterparts.⁹ Thus, while very few British administrators were interested in music per se, most believed that the state could use carefully-scripted displays of Africans playing European instruments and musical forms to attract, and then reform, a wide spectrum of the colony's population. Official reports of the Police Band's many "achievements" only heightened such certitude in and outside the colony. In 1928, the Governor of Sierra Leone petitioned London for the money needed to create his own Police Band so that he could replicate the Gold Coast's considerable "success".¹⁰

Administrative faith in the Band's performances also stemmed from its close proximity to, and frequent regulation by, the state. During the 1920s and 30s, both the Office of the Governor and the Colonial Office played an active role in the selection of the group's European bandmaster, a figurehead whom they wanted to have musical knowledge as well as the character, discipline, and patience needed to transform "illiterate" conscripts into "professional bandsmen".¹¹ Others proudly declared that the group's regimentation and constant supervision made it a consummate embodiment of discipline and order. Like other members of the colony's police force, the bandsmen lodged at the Accra Police Depot, followed a strict daily schedule of training and rehearsals, and maintained specific standards of uniformed dress and personal decorum.¹² By 1940, the Band had become the de facto musical ensemble of the Gold Coast government, performing at a variety of public and private events including state ceremonies, social occasions, and lavish parties.¹³

During the Second World War, the Accra administration's escalating trust in the Band led it to believe that its concerts might also have resonance outside the colony's confines. Although the Gold Coast was far removed from actual spheres of combat, it was an important center of Allied operations during the War, housing a Royal Air Force base, several resupply stations, and hastily erected military camps in Accra and Takoradi. Over the course of the early 1940s, thousands of British and American troops became temporary residents of the colony, where they spent months completing tedious, rather than dangerous, wartime tasks (Lawler 2002). In an effort to maintain the visiting soldiers' morale, the Gold Coast government hired a range of local musical and theatrical groups to regularly visit the Allied encampments (Collins 1996: 11, Cole 2001: 87-88, Plageman 2013: 103-107). One of its go-to options was the Gold Coast Police Band, whose diverse repertoire of military marches, film music, and swing numbers earned it considerable

⁹ "Obnoxious Customs," PRAAD-Accra, ADM 11/1/64; "Suppression of Patsintering, Ankademmu, and Odo Dances," PRAAD-Accra, ADM 11/1/1506.

¹⁰ "Military Band for Freetown," TNA, CO 267/625/14.

¹¹ "Application of J.E. Bennernagel for Post of Bandmaster, Gold Coast Police," TNA, CO 28/300/5; "Reports that Police Sergeant Major Coen Plans to Leave on the 7th or 14th of May," TNA, CO 23/275/12.

¹² "Police Band, 1931-36," PRAAD-Accra, CSO 25/1/49; "Clothing and Equipment for the Police Force," PRAAD-Accra, CSO 15/1/45; "Boots for Member of the Gold Coast Police Band," PRAAD-Accra, CSO 15/1/300/1 and 3.

¹³ Collins, "The Ghanaian Concert Party," 235; "Requesting visit of the Gold Coast Police Band to Lome, French Territory, 1943," PRAAD-Accra, CSO 15/1/301.

esteem. According to Tom Stenning, the group's bandmaster, American troops loved the Band; so much so that they repeatedly told him that it would "go over big" with discerning audiences in Chicago and New York.¹⁴ If the foreign visitors' reception of the Band advanced Accra's thinking about the group's future prospects, so did the actions of the British War Office, which deployed military bands in London and other cities as a means of raising public spirits amid the daily hardships of war, and Whitehall, which organized performances by British military bands in Australia and South Africa in order to garner popular support for the Allied cause and "cement the bonds of Empire".¹⁵

In the aftermath of both the War and the 1946 London Victory Celebrations—which marked the Allied triumph through ceremonies, concerts, and a massive parade featuring military contingents from various parts of the British Empire—Governor Burns contacted the Colonial Office about the possibility of having the Gold Coast Police Band visit Great Britain. More specifically, he proposed that the group, which he lauded as "the finest [musical] ensemble in all of West Africa", make a "lengthy tour" as a means of publicizing colonial achievements, rekindling public enthusiasm for Empire, and enhancing the prestige and power of the Colonial Office. Whitehall's response was extremely enthusiastic. In fact, officials in its West Africa Section universally agreed that the Band would attract large crowds, give colonialism a much-needed publicity boost, and advertise the cultural "benefits" the mother country had bestowed upon the Gold Coast and its other African holdings.¹⁶ In December, the Section invited two members of the Gold Coast Police—Commissioner R.H.W. Ballantine and Bandmaster Stenning—to travel to London so that they could initiate the tour's planning and organization. Eager to ensure that the Band reached broad audiences, they agreed that its visit should take place during the summer months (May through August) and encompass major cities as well as provincial towns in England, Wales, and Scotland. With the help of a hired commercial firm,¹⁷ they then pieced together an ambitious itinerary consisting of multiple performances in seventeen cities, appearances at a Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace and an elaborate Empire Day celebration at Trafalgar Square, a charity concert for the British Empire Leprosy Relief Association at London's Central Hall, and visits to the HMV and BBC radio studios (see Figure 1).¹⁸

After outlining the tour's logistical aspects, discussion turned to how Whitehall might best promote and publicize the Band as a microcosm of imperial efficacy.

¹⁴ *Daily Mirror*, January 20, 1947.

¹⁵ "Use of Military Bands," TNA, HO 199/432; "Visits of British Military Bands to Australia and South Africa," TNA, DO 35/461/5.

¹⁶ "Gold Coast Police Band, 1946-7," TNA, CO 96/807/1/5 and 9.

¹⁷ The hired firm was Ibbs and Tillet: "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of, 1947," TNA, CO 96/807/2/14 and 82. Also see "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/132, 190 and 191; *Derby Evening Telegraph*, July 10, 1947, pg. 4; *Dundee Courier and Advertiser*, July 11, 1947 pg. 2.

¹⁸ Since the archival record does not contain an official copy of the Band's final itinerary, I have compiled this version from a variety of available materials, including draft itineraries, booking contracts, and post-performance reports as well as articles from a number of British newspapers.

May 7-8	Band's Arrival at London Heathrow
May 9	Performance and Parade at Hounslow Heath, London
May 11	Performance at Buxton
May 16	Performance at Belle Vue, Manchester
May 18	Performance at Leamington Spa
May 21	Performance at BBC Studios and appearance on Picture Page Television Program
May 24	Performance at Empire Day Celebrations, St. Martins in the Field, Trafalgar Square, London
May 25-27	Performances at Leicester
May 28	Performance at Royal School of Music (Kneller Hall)
June 1-7	Performances at Bath
June 9	Performance at Scotland Yard and Tour of Police Training School
June 10	Performance at Buckingham Palace
June 15	Performance at Rhyl
June 16	Performance at Buxton
June 18	Performance at Horse Guards Parade, London
June 19	Performance at Royal Tournament, Olympia
June 22	Performance at Greenwich Park
June 24	Performance at Bournville
June 26	Recording Session at BBC Maida Vale Studio, London
June 29 - July 5	Performances at Clacton
July 7-13	Performances at Liverpool
July 14-16	Performances at Newcastle-Upon-Tyne
July 17-19	Performances at Edinburgh
July 20-21	Performances at Glasgow
July 22-23	Performances at Dunfermline
July 25	Performance for West African Students' Union
July 27-August 2	Performances at Hastings
August 3-9	Performances at Folkestone
August 10-16	Performances at Southend
August 24-27	Performances at Hyde Park, London
August 28	Performance at Central Hall, London For the British Empire Leprosy Relief Association
August 29	Performance for West African Students' Union at Royal Hotel, London
September 10	Band's Departure

Figure 1. Final Itinerary for the Gold Coast Police Band's 1947 Tour of Great Britain. Compiled by author.

Officials were particularly deliberate about ensuring that audiences received and heard the group as a colonial—not African—achievement. In January, they met with representatives from the Central Office of Information (COI), major newspapers such as the *Daily Mirror*, the BBC press and broadcasting divisions, the British Council, and the recently created Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), in order to provide them with “good factual information” about the Band, the Gold Coast, and the merits of colonial rule.¹⁹ They also provided such outlets with state-produced photographs, likely brought from the Gold Coast to London by Strike and Stenning, which they deemed suitable for wide-circulation (Figures 2 and 3). Next, they worked with the COI to design promotional posters as well as a four-page souvenir brochure that could be disseminated in advance of the Band’s visit. By early February, they had distributed 75,000 copies of the brochure, which depicted the group as an assemblage of musical novices who had “started from scratch,” received training from the colonial government, and become one of the finest ensembles anywhere in the British Empire, throughout London and other major cities.²⁰

Lastly, officials concocted a detailed plan to ensure that the Gold Coast bandmen had few opportunities to upset the tour’s status as a carefully-crafted showcase of Empire. They set firm limitations on the men’s mobility and daily affairs, mandating that they move as a group by bus, take meals in predetermined locations, and lodge in the secure confines of police barracks, military encampments, or P.O.W. camps. They also insisted that those responsible for supervising the bandmen throughout the tour—C.H.K. Strike (the colony’s Assistant Commissioner of Police), Stenning, and the band’s two Gold Coast officers, Sergeant Annan and Sub-Inspector Adjirackor—ensure that they constantly upheld military discipline.²¹ Finally, they instructed Strike to submit regular reports throughout the tour’s duration so that they could keep abreast of the bandmen’s behavior, the tour’s progression, and its impacts on British audiences.

Confident that they had prepared a foolproof promotion of British colonial power, officials in Accra and London spent the next several months relishing in the tour’s inevitable success. Numerous internal circulars celebrated audiences’ certain embrace of the Band as what Veit Erlman has called “Africa Civilized” (Erlmann 1994). Because they had choreographed the Band’s performances to emphasize its government-issued

¹⁹ “The Gold Coast Police Band, 1946-7,” TNA, CO 96/807/1/10; “Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of, 1947,” TNA, CO 96/807/2/2 and 4. In the late 1940s, the *Daily Mirror* sold roughly 4.5 million copies per day.

²⁰ “Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of, 1947,” TNA, CO 96/807/2/13.

²¹ “Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II,” TNA, CO 96/807/3/122, 199, and 254. Such concerns echoed A. Fiddian’s 1924 refusal to allow members of the Gold Coast Regimental Band to complete a training course at Kneller Hall because his “great horror of this class of black man being brought over here unless he is under military discipline”: “Police Band,” TNA, CO 98/673. They also echo concerns about the need for strict “supervision” voiced in previous proposals to have the Jamaica Military Band, which had severed its formal ties with the West Indian Frontier Force, make a tour of Great Britain. Such proposals were ultimately denied: “Jamaica Military Band: Visit to England 1935,” TNA, CO 137/807/9; “Jamaica Military Band Visit to England 1937,” TNA, 137/833/3; “Jamaica Military Band Visit to England,” TNA, CO 137816/5.



Figure 2. “Bandmaster Mr. T. Stenning, A.R.C.M. Bandmaster to the 11th Hussars (P.A.O.) 1923–36. Bandmaster to the Royal Military College (Sandhurst) 1936–1943. Photo issued by the West African Photographic Service, Regional Informational Office, Accra, Gold Coast, British West Africa.” TNA, CO 96/807/1.



Figure 3. “The Band of the Gold Coast Police at the Police Depot, Accra, Gold Coast. Photo issued by the West African Photographic Service, Regional Informational Office, Accra, Gold Coast, British West Africa.” TNA, CO 96/807/1.

uniforms and mastery of a range of British military standards, light operas, waltzes, swing numbers, and recent film music, officials fully expected audiences to see it as a manifestation of administrative achievement and a small-scale metaphor for the colonial process.²² Others boldly proclaimed that the Band's renditions of "God Save the King", appearances at Buckingham Palace or Windsor Castle, and commercial sale of 10" 78 rpm H.M.V. records would impart a renewed sense of national and imperial pride upon the British public.²³

While these repeated declarations confirmed the impression that the tour's success was *fait accompli*, so too did early accounts of its operation and impact. During the tour's first six weeks, Office circulars went to great lengths to corroborate administrators' preconceived expectations. Many affirmed the tour's success by emphasizing the large size of the crowds which gathered to see the Band perform in and outside of London. Reports claimed that 5,000 people saw the group play at a much-publicized Royal Garden Party at Buckingham Palace, 18,000 more attended its performances in Leicester, and city officials in Bath had been forced to cancel the Band's appearance in a public parade due to their fear that it would cause "unbearable congestion."²⁴ Strike's updates provided further fodder for unbridled optimism by declaring that British onlookers consistently received the Band in a "most enthusiastic manner" and left its concerts with an "education" about the Gold Coast and the continued importance of "colonial development."²⁵ Even the manager of the Buxton Pavilion Gardens, who announced that the group "created a tremendous impression on the people who were present," verified its status as an effective and accessible embodiment of colonial power: "I would like to pay a personal tribute to the conduct of the Band...and to the Conductor Mr. T. Stenning, who has undoubtedly achieved something of which *we* may be proud."²⁶

²² "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/146, 156 and 209. Oddly, official archival files do not contain a single program from any of the Band's performances. The only one I have found to date is "Band of the Gold Coast Police—Souvenir Leaflet," Accessed on Windows on Warwickshire, www.windowsonwarwickshire.org.uk/default.asp

²³ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/155, 156, 161, and 170. While Whitehall allowed the Band to perform the occasional highlife to give audiences a taste of the latest "West African musical craze", it wanted the group's on-stage acts to emphasize visual and sonic aesthetics that looked and sounded familiar, local, and synonymous with a British-centric model of "civilization". During its stay in Britain, the Police Band recorded a number of songs for HMV, including Caribbean songs such as "Everybody Loves Saturday Night" (HMV JZ 281), European standards such as "Poet and Peasant Overture" (HMV JZ 282), and highlife numbers including "Rock'n in Rhythm" and "Highlife Dagomba" (HMV JZ 283) as well as "Elmina Blues" and "Burma Special" (HMV JZ 286). "For more on these recordings, see Coester, "Revisiting Britain's 'Afro Trend,'" 47.

²⁴ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/155, 161, and 165. Their contents mirror assertions offered in local newspaper coverage: "Empire Day Celebration," *Gloucestershire Echo*, May 24, 1947; "5,000 at Royal Garden Party," *The Yorkshire Post*, June 11, 1947; "5,000 Guests at the Palace," *The London Times*, June 11, 1947; "Mayor Welcomes Band," *Bath Weekly Chronicle and Herald*, June 14, 1947.

²⁵ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/239 and 254.

²⁶ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/173: emphasis mine.

While the bulk of the tour's paper trail frames it as an efficacious promotion of colonialism, it also contains a number of fragments—incomplete exchanges, odd declarations, and unfinished accounts—which point to rather different outcomes. Unlike the documents outlined above, these fragments harbor official anxiety and doubt, reveal unexpected interest in and praise for the bandsmen, and point to results that those who planned the tour neither scripted nor imagined as possible. As a result, they not only destabilize officials' proclamations about the tour's success; they ask us to reconsider the state's ability to deploy staged musical events as a means of fulfilling its wider sociopolitical aims.

Archival fragments and a “failed” showcase of empire

The first set of fragments concern the Office's relationship with the British Musicians' Union, a labor organization formed in 1893 as a means of protecting the nation's professional and amateur musicians. By 1946 the Union had become quite powerful, claiming roughly 60% of British musicians as members, and had positioned itself as a central actor in the rejuvenation of the nation's post-war music scene (Jempson 1993, Cloonan and Brennan 2013). In the process, it had also garnered a reputation as a staunch opponent to foreign musicians' visits to British soil. As several scholars have noted, the Union consistently boycotted international artists from the mid-1920s until the mid-1950s; a stance that both protected its members' welfare and reflected the xenophobic attitudes and racist sentiments that some surely possessed (Oliver 1990, Green 1990, McKay 2005, Cloonan and Brennan 2013).

From the vantage point of those responsible for planning the Police Band's 1947 tour, the Union's penchant for spurning international visits—including those from artists based in British colonies—was quite concerning.²⁷ As a result, they requested that the Office of the Undersecretary of State for the Colonies contact the Union, explain the tour's rationale, and obtain its show of support. In late January 1947, J.K. Thompson penned a letter to Fred Dambman, the Union's General Secretary, “politely informing” him of Whitehall's plans. The tour, he explained, was not a money-making endeavor: it was an “educational venture” aimed at publicizing the Gold Coast, promoting colonial achievements, and invoking a sense of Imperial unity.²⁸ After appealing to the Union's “patriotic spirit”, Thompson insisted that any opposition to the tour would upset months of administrative planning and strike a severe blow to “the welfare of the people of the Gold Coast and the colonies”. When Dambman indicated that the Union would in fact boycott the tour because of its detrimental

²⁷ The British War Office had long struggled to placate the Musicians' Union's concerns about the employment of government-sponsored military bands, see: “Employment of Military Bands in Civilian Engagements,” TNA, WO 32/3096; “Complain by Musicians' Union,” TNA, WO 32/3907.

²⁸ “Gold Coast Police Band, 1946-7,” TNA, CO 96/807/1/18; “Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of, 1947,” TNA, CO 96/807/2/21.

impacts on British musicians' "opportunities for employment", the Secretary's Office unleashed a string of successive letters pleading it to change its mind.²⁹

Such efforts bore sudden fruit in early April, when the Union's Assistant Secretary traveled to Whitehall to inform the Office that it was now willing to support the tour on one condition: that it be allowed to induct the bandsmen as Union members upon their arrival in London. Though delighted with prospects of gaining the organization's support, gathered officials immediately informed the Assistant Secretary that they could not approve the bandsmen's membership. The problem, they explained, was that British government employees—at home and in the colonies—were legally prohibited from joining trade unions. When the Union maintained that it would boycott the tour unless this demand was met, administrators in Accra and London agreed to make an exception and allow the organization to induct the bandsmen as members for the "brief duration" of the tour. While such temporal limits were key to officials' acquiescence, so was their uniform certitude that the Union's insistence amounted to little more than a "publicity stunt" aimed at helping it deflect its racist and xenophobic past. The Union, Accra and Whitehall agreed, would never regard the men as more than symbolic or token members.³⁰

Shortly after the Band's arrival in London, however, Dambman indicated that the organization had rather different plans. In a letter penned to the Colonial Office, the General Secretary outlined a set of demands designed to protect the bandsmen as full-fledged Union members. First, he outlined his expectation that the Office would pay the bandsmen its minimum rate of compensation for each performance given on British soil: an amount that undoubtedly exceeded the small "monthly advance" that Accra had promised to pay them. Second, he insisted that the bandsmen's arrival and forthcoming induction into the Union's ranks marked an alteration in their status. Since the men had come to Britain to carry out an extensive musical tour comprised of pre-arranged concerts, they had "ceased to be [colonial] policemen" and usurped their standing as imperial subjects. They were, at least for the tour's duration, musical professionals entitled to the same set of rights and benefits as other Union members. Lastly, the General Secretary asked the Office to promptly arrange a time for him to meet with the Gold Coast visitors so that he could welcome them to Great Britain and formally induct them into the organization's ranks.³¹

Since Dambman's letter clearly challenged officials' optimistic expectations about how the British public would regard and receive the Band, it is not entirely surprising that subsequent archival documents serve to silence the Union's assertions. Successive documents offer no information about the Union's level of actual contact with the bandsmen, preventing us from knowing if they met with the organization's leadership, joined its ranks, or accrued any corresponding benefits. More surprisingly, the remaining paper trail says very little about how the Colonial Office received and

²⁹ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of, 1947," TNA, CO 96/807/2/21, 30 and 84.

³⁰ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of, 1947," TNA, CO 96/807/2/84, 107, 119.

³¹ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/145 and 166.

reacted to the Union's staunch concern with the men's well-being. With the exception of one lone archival fragment, colonial record keeping brings the narrative of the Union's involvement with (or interference in) the tour to an abrupt, and rather unsatisfying, end.

That fragment—a one-page response compiled nearly two weeks after Dambman's letter—suggests that Whitehall was deeply concerned that the Union's "misinterpretation" of the bandsmen's standing posed a significant threat to both the tour and Empire's future prospects. As a result, the Office provided the organization with a succinct, but emphatic, explanation of why it had no right to speak on the visiting bandsmen's behalf. The problem, it claimed, was partially one of jurisdiction. Although the Gold Coast government had agreed to allow the men to become temporary Union members, the men were still colonial subjects under its authority, care, and guidance. The other problem was that the Union lacked the fundamental knowledge about the Gold Coast or West Africa needed to effectively look out for the bandsmen's best interests. As prepared promotional materials explained, the Gold Coast had a musical landscape was drastically "different than that of Great Britain" and contained "few civilized musicians" other than those who had received government support and training. Since it was "only through the police force that a band had been able to be collected for an overseas tour at all", the Union could not rightfully claim that the men were musical professionals akin to their British counterparts. The men were policemen who happened to have received some musical training from the colonial state.³²

If colonial record keeping successfully silenced the threat of the Union's misguided proposals, it soon had to manage a second set of fragments which began to infiltrate its confines in early July, roughly halfway through the tour's progression. These fragments reveal that segments of the British public had also "misinterpreted" the Band's performances. Of particular concern were repeated assertions, in newspaper articles and unsolicited letters from public officials and self-declared fans, that the group was on par with, or even superior to, the British ensembles it often performed alongside. Although Whitehall wanted the group's martial appearance and carefully-screened repertoire of popular songs to garner a positive reception, it did not want onlookers to announce that it had "outclassed" British bands that had "been performing such songs for many a year".³³ Officials regarded such sentiments as serious threats for several reasons. First, conclusions that a colonial band had managed to equal or surpass its metropolitan counterparts did little to advance administrative claims about the need for colonialism's continuation. Second, such declarations about the Band's proficiency frequently failed to recognize that the group had anything to do with British rule. Take, for instance, the

³² "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/147.

³³ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/192 and 213. The Band played with the Coldstream Guards and the Royal Air Force Band at Buckingham Palace: "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/156. Such statements also appear in a number of available newspaper articles, see: "Gold Coast Band at Bath," *Bath Weekly Chronicle and Herald*, May 31, 1947; *The Times*, June 11, 1947; "Hotsam and Jetsam," *Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*, June 14, 1947; "Belra Concert," *The Western Morning News*, August 20, 1947.

letter Gillian Pollard of Clacton sent to the Colonial Office in late July. After unabashedly asking if high-ranking officials could help her obtain the bandsmen's autographs, she proclaimed that their talents and accomplishments had convinced her that West Africans were not the "savage or uncivilized" people she had previously thought them to be. Rather than passively viewing the Band as a colonial ensemble, she actively interpreted it as an "African group" reflective of Gold Coast talent, dedication, and achievement.³⁴

Additional archival fragments provide further evidence that British audiences had begun to disassociate the Band from the project of Empire. One circular bemoaned local newspapers' tendency to heap considerable praise upon the bandsmen's musical abilities without mentioning how the Gold Coast government had fostered their development. Another lamented that while the promotional photographs released by the COI clearly depicted Stenning as the main musical authority in charge of the ensemble, he, Strike, or any other British person rarely appeared in those published in British newspapers. A shocked and infuriated Stenning even found that HMV's promotions of the group's recordings "hid the fact that a white man had anything to do with the band at all!"³⁵ A final report expressed similar alarm about growing references to the Band as a "jazz ensemble": a moniker which suggested that it was part of the international domain of "authentic" black music rather than a product of British imperial might (Tackley 2014).³⁶

Over the course of the tour's final months, the Colonial Office became increasingly convinced that such misconceptions, which worked against the preservation of the dichotomies—European/African, colonizer/colonized, civilized/uncivilized—central to the colonial status quo, warranted a response. Hoping to salvage the tour's status as a showcase of Empire, Whitehall unleashed a new wave of "informational materials" intended to reestablish the Band as a state-managed ensemble and the bandsmen as colonial policemen in need of continued guidance. Written circulars reminded press outfits and city officials about the group's "true status" and the vital role that the Gold Coast government had played in its development.³⁷ In late August, Governor Burns flew to London so that he could attend the Band's charity concert at Central Hall and promote the wider mission of his administration. The Colonial Film Unit even arranged for the production of a short film that portrayed the men not as talented musicians who had come to Britain to perform on stage, but as police officers whose principal aim was to "learn" from their metropolitan counterparts.³⁸ And while scattered fragments allow us to see the basic outline of these efforts, colonial record keeping once again

³⁴ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/196.

³⁵ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/245. Stenning believed that HMV had intentionally arranged for photographs of the Band to be taken in his absence and noted that he reached the set only to find Sgt. Annan leading the band "holding my baton"! Also see "Lonely Ram and 'Lost' Band," *Nottingham Evening Post*, May 16, 1947; "Gold Coast Police at Bowls," *Hastings and St. Leonards Observer*, August 2, 1947.

³⁶ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/278.

³⁷ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/254.

³⁸ "Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II," TNA, CO 96/807/3/191 and 217. The finished product is available for viewing as "Colonial Cinemazine No. 9" at <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/node/211>

obscures their impact. After the Band boarded a plane to return to the Gold Coast on September 10, 1947, a final report optimistically announced that the tour had led “a very large number of people” to have the future of the “Gold Coast, Africa, and the colonies generally brought forcibly, but pleasantly, to their minds.”³⁹

Conclusion

So what can we take away from the Police Band’s 1947 tour of Great Britain? If we cannot use the sizeable paper trail it prompted officials in Accra and London to produce and exchange—one of the largest collections of archival records concerning music during the period of British rule in the Gold Coast—to resurrect the bandmen, reconstruct any of their dozens of performances, or analyze the impressions that they left upon a wider British public, what value does it hold? Does its uneven and fragmented nature offer any lessons concerning this unprecedented musical event, the colonial state’s deployment of staged musical performances, or the wider confluence of music and imperial power? And what, if any, insights do its contents extend to our thinking about the sources and methods we might employ to unearth and analyze past musical events?

While the inadequacies of the colonial state’s record keeping about the tour are clear, I want to suggest that it points scholars interested in musical performance in colonial Africa in a number of important directions. The first concerns the nature of the tour’s archival content, specifically the consistent disjuncture that separates the vast majority of its contents (which optimistically foreground the Band’s efficacious appearance as a showcase of Empire) from its scattered set of fragments (which reveal glimpses of administrative anxiety, unexpected courses of action, and winnowing confidence). Since reconciling this fissure is no easy task, we need to take these fragments seriously, privilege rather than overlook their contents, and recognize that one of the tour’s most visible impacts was the remarkable sense of unease it produced in Accra and London. Although such files contain no honest admission about the limits of bureaucratic planning or overt pronouncement that the tour had “failed”, their final contents suggest that the Gold Coast government and Colonial Office agreed that it was not an experiment worth repeating. On January 19, 1948, W.M. Coester penned a letter to the Colonial Office from her home in Harlesden requesting that it bring the Gold Coast Police Band back to Britain for an encore visit. But rather than lauding her “great anticipation” or considerable enthusiasm for seeing the Band perform again in-person, the Office curtly informed her that a second visit had “not [been] proposed.”⁴⁰ This frank declaration, coupled with the fact that the Gold Coast Police Band all but disappears from the colonial state’s documentary record until Ghana’s 1957 independence, suggests that officials likely believed that the risks of deploying its staged musical performances had started to outweigh possible rewards.

We might also consider the possibility that the anxieties and unease that appear in

³⁹ “Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of Part II,” TNA, CO 96/807/3/239 and 254.

⁴⁰ “Gold Coast Police Band: Visit of, 1948,” TNA, CO 96/807/4/1 and 2.

tour's paper-trail were neither new nor specific to that event. To date, a great deal of the scholarship on the musical ensembles that colonial governments created and deployed within Africa has framed them as "tools of Empire": a label that accords considerable weight to staged performances' ability to effectively project the state's desired "ideas of authority" (Ranger 1975; Herbert and Sarkissian 1997; Boonzajer Flaes 2000; Plageman 2013). But might this neat and tidy view overemphasize the nexus of music and colonial power? And could it rely too heavily on the inherent flaws of colonial record keeping as the basis for its formulation? As the archival fragments from the 1947 tour reveal, administrative confidence in the state's ability to deploy musical events could be misplaced, overemphasized, and promulgated as a means of obscuring weaknesses and doubt. Scholars working on music have certainly recognized the colonial archive as a slanted source base which unapologetically privileged top-down perspectives, but have we fully appreciated how it was, as Thomas Richards asserts, a site of imperial fantasy, imagination, and conjecture? A place where bureaucrats discussed not simply what they knew to be true, but what they felt, expected, and hoped to be true (Richards 1993: 1-9)? Can we do more to recognize that colonial record keeping about musical acts was part and parcel of a larger archival project that served to cement a particular "order of things" consistent with the expansion and implementation of state authority (Stoler 2002: 87)? Since colonial documents about staged musical performances were, in a sense, sites of performance—"active substances" that administrators used to project and create their desired outcomes—we are well-equipped to do so (Stoler 2009: 1, 18–23).

Finally, we might regard the case of the Gold Coast Police Band's 1947 tour as a call to continue to scrutinize the colonial archive as a source of information of past musical events. In recent years, scholars focused on music in African contexts have done a great deal to utilize—and occasionally create—new types of repositories that privilege audio and visual sources.⁴¹ These collections are unquestionably important, not merely for their rare holdings and multifaceted contents, but for the fact that they privilege the perspective of artists, audiences, and ordinary actors all too often omitted from the written accounts managed by the colonial (and post-colonial) state. But as we compile these resources, contemplate research strategies, and consider methodological practice, we cannot afford to disregard the colonial archive. As the fragments of the tour suggest, its contents can enable us to see how colonial musical performances were embedded in complex cultural currents that lay beyond officials' control as well as the territorially-bound entities they established, administered, and endeavored to define. The unexpected embrace of the bandmen by the Musicians' Union and audience members provide evidence of the transnational and cosmopolitan "in-between spaces" that lie amid the oft-employed dichotomy of colonizer-colonized (McKay 2005: 12, Feld 2012; Jaji 2014).

⁴¹ In Ghana alone, such collections include the Bookor African Popular Musical Archives Foundation (founded and managed by Dr. John Collins; <http://www.bapmaf.com>) in Accra, the Gramophone and Records Museum (created by the late Kwame Sarpong; http://ghana.icom.museum/24008_e.html) in Cape Coast, and the Ghana Broadcasting Company Gramophone Library (spearheaded by Marcus Coester; <http://gbcghana.com/gramophone/index.html>) in Accra.

They also point to other how other written, but consistently underutilized sources such as newspaper articles, collected pamphlets, and organizational records, might expand our coverage and appreciation of past musical events.

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